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SUBJECT: OFDA VISIT TO KENYA'S MARSABIT DISTRICT

Summary

1. An acute dry season, amplified by poor seasonal rains last November is eroding livelihoods and food security of pastoralist populations in Kenya's Marsabit District. Livestock numbers have declined due to the lack of access to pasture and water. Tribal conflict is preventing many pastoralists from utilizing traditional dry season coping mechanisms. The Government of Kenya (GOK) and several NGOs are responding to the humanitarian needs of more than 80 percent of the district's population. Failure of the coming long season rains will eliminate remaining animals for many already marginalized pastoralists and cause significant numbers to migrate to the district's urban areas in search of assistance. End Summary

2. OFDA Regional Advisor traveled throughout Marsabit District March 21-24. The district borders with Ethiopia, is inhabited primarily by pastoralist tribes entirely dependent on livestock for food security and livelihoods, and is extremely underdeveloped. USAID/OFDA met with several NGOs working in the area, talked with District officials, drought monitoring entities and spoke with pastoralists in several locations.

Current Situation

3. Almost 80 percent of Marsabit District's population of 136,000 is receiving or being targeted for food assistance. The Kenyan Red Cross (KRC) is the emergency lead agency and distributing commodities from both the World Food Program and GOK pipelines. The KRC reported no beneficiary overlap in the two programs but some delays with respect to deliveries of pulses and oil. The Regional Advisor attended a GOK commodity distribution in Balessa settlement and found that beneficiaries were registered appropriately, and there were multiple commodities available, however quantities distributed were below the 2100 kilocalorie/person/day standard. Beneficiaries throughout the district confirmed receipt of rations but complained about inadequate quantities.

4. The District Commissioner reported there are 38 health centers in the district and several visited were functioning. Each health post was staffed, had basic pharmaceuticals with adequate expiration dates, cold chain facilities and available surveillance data. Immunization rates in the Bubisa and Torbi Divisions were above 90 percent according to local immunization records at the health posts.

5. Health officers reported that the major morbidities are respiratory infections, malaria and diarrheal disease, but have not seen a significant increase in the number of patients. There were no reports of measles outbreak. Health clinics are not overwhelmed with patients and everyone is attended to despite the ability to pay fees. Some complaints were heard about the price of medications unavailable at the health centers that need to be purchased at local pharmacies.

6. There has been no objective measurement of current conditions with respect to malnutrition. UNICEF initiated a nutritional survey last week and results are expected by April 15. Health centers refer malnutrition cases to NGO supplemental feeding programs, and severe cases are sent to the Marsabit District hospital. The Bubisa health authorities reported that about eight percent of the children in its constituency were receiving supplemental foods.

17. Twenty eight boreholes are scattered throughout the district to serve the nomadic pastoralist populations. The DC reported that all are functioning, and that three drilling rigs had arrived in the area to drill another 16 boreholes. At wells visited, local water committees confirmed they were receiving fuel and spare parts from the GOK and pumps were generally running about 20 hours per day. Boreholes visited were not overwhelmed by animals, however, a system of rotation for watering was in place and herders have designated times to bring animals.

18. Water tankering is being carried out by four organizations in the district, and there were several tanks on the sides of roads that are filled by the tankering activity. A recent donation by the Norwegians of seven water trucks will arrive in April.

19. Livestock has been particularly affected by the current crisis. The GOK estimates that 50 percent of the cattle and small stock have perished, however, no objective surveys have been carried out to date. There were several carcasses (mostly cattle) on the roads traveled and numerous abandoned goats that were too weak to keep up with the main herds.

10. The lack of pasture is the biggest problem affecting the livestock in the district. Although there are functioning boreholes, the pasture in the vicinity has been consumed. There is significant pasture in some areas of the district, however, no water exists and there is an issue of insecurity. Many pastoralists reported that their herds, which once numbered in the hundreds, were now down to 20 or 30 animals. Rain has begun to fall in Marsabit, but temperature change and subsequent pneumonia continues to kill many already weakened livestock.

11. Coordination of the emergency response appears to be good in Marsabit. The District Commissioner heads a group (District Steering Group) that meets weekly with implementation partners to plan humanitarian operations. The group recently recommended increasing the number of food recipients from 105,000 to 120,000 (or almost 90 percent of the population). There was no detail from the DC's Office on how District Contingency Funds (\$400,000) were being applied to the emergency.

Conflict

12. The Gabra tribe is the predominant ethnic group in the district, and was victimized in July 2005 when neighboring Borana raiders murdered more than 90 people in Turbi center. Local sources report the conflict was not sparked so much by a lack of resources, but by political positioning. The fighting has continued on a smaller scale over the last year, which contradicts the historical relationship between the two that included intermarriage and sharing of natural resources. Due to the conflict, traditional drought coping mechanisms of migrating animals have been impeded. Gabra pastoralist are unable, or are in fear of, grazing animals in areas currently with pasture and water due to fear of attack from Borana tribesmen.

Boom and Bust Cycle

13. Several village elders described a livestock boom and bust cycle experienced by local herdsmen that began around 1970. Despite a regular appeal from the GOK in Nairobi for drought assistance, local elders said they experienced real drought every six or seven years. Current conditions are similar to those experienced in 1972, 1992, and 2000, and that intervals were becoming shorter. The drought period will usually reduce stocks of goats and cattle by 80 percent, followed by several years of normal conditions that eventually replenish herd sizes. Local estimates are that it will take five years for pastoralist to recover what was lost recently to the current dry spell.

Solutions to Current Predicament

14. Both GOK and village elders highlighted the need for development progress to break the boom and bust cycle affecting food security and livelihoods. Specifically, the need for improved roads to reduce the cost of transporting animals to market, livelihood diversification (salaried jobs to reduce dependence on livestock), and the need to reestablish a meat commission? (as was available in the past) as an outlet to sell animals on a regular basis, stabilize prices for animals, and smooth household income.

Coping Mechanisms and Dependency on Natural Events

¶15. Traditional coping mechanisms for drought in Marsabit include migration of herds, and the slaughtering of goats and camels for food (milk is the primary food source in normal times). UNICEF reported that there was no evidence that pastoralists had begun to slaughter animals to cope, and many retained animals in hope of improvements from the oncoming Long Rain season.

¶16. During the visit, we found little evidence of pastoralists attempts to mitigate the affects of the dry season. There were no local initiatives to improve the depths of water pans, improved water storage, or off take of livestock before conditions deteriorated. Some herders explained they had sold a few extra goats last season to pay for water at the boreholes. Populations are entirely at the mercy of the weather's ability to provide natural water points and pasture; and donor funded NGO activity.

Conclusions / Recommendations

¶17. There is a high risk that a failure of the rains in the next long rain season will eliminate remaining stocks for a large percentage of pastoralists' herds already affected by the dry conditions. Pastoralists with 10-15 remaining animals could lose everything unless natural conditions quickly improve, thus forcing families into local towns to become indefinitely dependent on emergency aid. Targeted feeding of core animals for vulnerable pastoralists until rains regenerate pasture would prevent many from losing their entire herd and reduce migration to towns for assistance.

¶18. Emergency distributions of food to pastoralist families will need to continue until rains have recharged pasture and livestock stabilizes. The normal start of the long rain season is early April. Although the targeting and delivery mechanisms are in place, USAID will need to monitor food pipeline conditions.

¶19. Continued financial support will be needed to maintain boreholes and tanker water to affected families until the Long Rains arrive. USAID/OFDA will continue to support UNICEF programs targeting emergency water interventions. Water storage at schools and health facilities needs to be improved to support school feeding programs and health care assistance. GOK plans to drill 16 more boreholes in pastoralist areas should reduce competition for water from animals in the long term, however, completion of this objective needs to be monitored.

¶20. Nutritional results will be available mid April. The results will direct GOK and UNICEF as to the numbers needing emergency nutritional support. USAID/OFDA will continue to support UNICEF emergency nutritional interventions.

¶21. Carefully targeted animal restocking activities may be appropriate after the next rainy season and once the current environment has had time to recover and stabilize.

¶22. Government investment is needed in the district to break the boom and bust cycle of drought for pastoral communities. Introduction of livelihood diversification, improved transport infrastructure and marketing opportunities for the sale of livestock to smooth price variations would ease the affect of future dry periods.

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